

# Choice and Occasion

by  
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The gods implore not,  
Plead not, solicit not; they only  
offer  
Choice and occasion, which once  
being passed  
Return no more.—“The Masque  
of Pandora.”



“BUT it’s eleven o’clock  
now,” Mrs. Linnell  
protested.

“Then, if you don’t hurry, it will be  
after eleven before we start,” the laughing  
voice urged her.

“I haven’t said I would go. In fact, I’m  
not going.”

“Just this once! We’ll spin out to  
Burns’s Woods—I know those crisscross  
roads with my eyes shut, but there never  
are any cars out there at night, and it’s so  
dark and still and quiet under the pines.  
Before we reach the woods there are farms  
with hedges of that winter honeysuckle—  
Kate Payne calls it ‘first breath of spring’  
—and it’s unbelievably fragrant as one  
drives by at night. Don’t you hear your  
sister flowers calling you, Lady of the  
Posies?”

Mrs. Linnell liked Jim Blake’s name for  
her. She never had a trowel in her hand  
in her life, and she knew as little about the  
cultivation of flowers as the dynasty of  
the Pharaohs, but she valued the sugges-  
tion of daintiness which fresh flowers gave,  
and always wore them. Though Gus Lin-  
nell grumbled occasionally at the florists’  
bills, it was worth a protest or two to be  
thought of as the Lady of the Posies by  
the most attractive bachelor in town.

Jim stood in the shadow on the steps  
of the porch, and the light from the open  
door fell upon her vivid, pretty face.

“By Jove, you’re bewitch-  
ing enough to turn any man’s  
head!” he exclaimed impet-  
uously. “Where’s Linnell to-  
night? If you, belonged to  
me, I can tell you that I  
shouldn’t let you be moping  
all by yourself.”

“Gus went off this morn-  
ing on a business trip. Men  
must work and women must have new  
hats, you know.”

“I swear I hadn’t an idea of seeing you  
to-night. I just ran the car by here, in the  
way I do semioccasionally.” His impudent  
voice caressed her with their unspoken un-  
derstanding of the fact that they had been  
carrying on a long-range, very discreet,  
very innocuous flirtation for the past four  
months. “The light shone squarely on  
you, sitting there all by your lonesome self,  
and I suddenly wanted you right in the  
little old car with me.” A deeper note  
crept into his voice; the entreaty verged on  
command. “It’s growing later, Miss Posy.  
Put on a heavy coat, because it’s cold  
driving, even on a spring night.”

She rose and went into the house. When  
she came out, she had on her long motor-  
coat. Jim could see the heightened color  
in her cheeks and hear her uneven breath-  
ing.

“It’s just a tiny little lark,” he soothed  
her, as he helped her into the car, which  
he had stopped half a block beyond her  
house. “Not a full-grown lark with wings  
that can fly to any dangerous distance, but  
a harmless little unfledged thing.”

She hardly apprehended his words, but  
they were both aware that their hands had  
trembled as they touched.

They talked rapidly and gaily, and when a soft silence fell between them they brushed it aside as a perilous thing. Many miles beyond the town they were passing a farmhouse when Elinor said:

"There's that honeysuckle! It's even sweeter than you said."

"And having you with me is even sweeter than I thought," he answered.

"All winter—" she began, and broke off in confusion.

He understood and took it up.

"I know. All winter—at dances, on the links, wherever we've casually happened to meet, just passing on the street, even—we've been *conscious* of each other."

"It has been more than that, hasn't it?"

She barely whispered the question, though there was only the spring night and the deserted road to hear his answer. It came almost roughly.

"Yes, it has been more than that. Every time we've danced together, touched hands, looked into each other's eyes, we have thrilled with it, haven't we, Elinor?"

She made a shamed gesture of assent.

"I didn't mean to. I couldn't help it, somehow."

Even to herself she did not acknowledge that she had fostered the sensation, with the spice it put into her easy, monotonous life with good old Gus. She preferred to feel that they had been swept from their moorings by an overwhelming rush of emotion, which of course they would have the nobility to conquer at the proper time. This indiscretion should be their only one, a "last ride together"—hadn't she read a poem with a title like that?

They had reached the long, quiet stretches of Burns's Woods, where night brooded in the thick pines.

"It has meant this to me," went on Jim. "I was on the very brink of being engaged to Kate Payne when you came into my life this winter. It was at that domino ball, you remember. I had met you before, but I thought of you merely as the prettiest woman in town and Gus Linnell's wife, but that night we—we—"

"We flirted a little," she suggested, laughing.

"We pretty well did, and I've been a cad to Kate ever since, putting off everything. I couldn't ask her to marry me with my mind possessed by you—*possessed!*"

Perhaps it was only Elinor Linnell's vanity which was stirred by the realization

that although she was twenty-seven, and had thought the door of romance irrevocably shut when she married six years before, she could still hold her own against a rival with all the allure of girlhood. Her ungloved hand slipped to Jim's sleeve and rested there.

He stopped the car abruptly.

"You want to light a cigarette?" she asked, but she knew it was not that.

"No. I want something I cannot have, and so I am going to take what belongs to me. The way you feel toward me at this moment is *mine*, and no other man's!"

He put his arms around her, deliberately drew her close to him, and kissed her on the mouth.

## II

SHE had meant to deny him when the moment of reckoning came, as all winter she had felt it must inevitably come. Now she realized that she had long since lost the battle, that her power of resistance to him had slipped away in little capitulations. Her foe was within herself, in her throbbing pulses and her passionate responsiveness.

"I am Gus Linnell's wife!" she told herself desperately, but the words failed to hypnotize her into resistance.

She lay in Jim's arms, her face uplifted to his, his kisses thrilling her with waves of warm, irresistible emotion, her heart answering his inarticulate words of longing.

"I am Gus Linnell's wife," she cried aloud in half-sobbing protest, but he stopped the cry with kisses against her throat, her face, her hair.

"But you are my sweetheart, Elinor!"

"You forget Kate."

The words were barely audible, but his arms relaxed and he slowly released her.

"Yes, I forgot there was any woman in the world but you."

He started the motor again and wheeled his car toward the town. Again they rode in silence, the memory of those savage kisses burning into the consciousness of both.

"We—we didn't mean to," she ventured.

"You didn't, darling," he defended her against herself. "I did!"

She had always sensed in him a certain paradoxical chivalry. He belonged to the class of men who would take advantage of a woman and then cheerfully go to the stake to prove her "as chaste as ice."

Presently she shivered.

"It's growing so chilly, Jim—it must be very late." Glancing at the automobile clock, she gave a cry of fright. "Oh, Jim, it's five minutes past one! Did you dream we had been gone so long? Suppose somebody should see us come in?"

"I'll put you out at your side yard, and you can slip in at the back, under the trees. Nobody is ever out on this road late; it leads through the farming district, and they all go to sleep with the chickabiddies. I swear I didn't mean to keep you out as late as this. Kiss me, Posy Lady, to show you aren't vexed with me!"

Obediently she leaned nearer and kissed his cheek. The thought pricked her that when Gus returned to-morrow he would bring her a gift, as he always did, and she would thank him with a kiss. She suddenly felt consumed with the desire to get home.

"Go faster, Jim," she urged. "Aren't you slowing down?"

"There's something dark on the road ahead, just beyond that curve. Good Lord, it's a car turned turtle!"

"Must we stop?" whispered Elinor.

With the instinctive courtesy of the road, Jim had already applied the brakes. In another moment their search-lights shone on the wrecked machine and on a human body that lay pinned beneath it, twisted and unstriving.

A man rushed toward them, hailing them wildly. Sweat was pouring from his white face, and one arm hung limp.

"For Heaven's sake, stop!" he cried. "My chauffeur is killed, and my friend here is horribly hurt. God sent you to us! Help me to get Jamieson in your car, and I'll stay here with poor O'Hara until you can send a car from the nearest garage. I'm Baxter."

"You're hurt, too?"

"Nothing—just a broken left arm."

He slipped his uninjured arm around his friend. Jamieson staggered to his feet, reeled a step forward, but, exhausted by pain and blinded by blood, which was pouring from a cut on his forehead, he sank to the ground.

"You'll have to help me lift him in," gasped Baxter. "For Heaven's sake, man, hurry!"

Jim turned to Elinor Linnell. She had averted her face so that the stranger could not see her.

"What shall we do?" he asked hoarsely. "The hospital?"

Situated in the heart of the town, it was impossible to reach the hospital without passing down the principal street, blazing with hundreds of lights, or to stop before its door without being in the glare of the big arc-light. If they took the man in, to-morrow the town would be ringing with the question:

"Why were Jim Blake and Mrs. Linnell riding alone together at one o'clock in the morning?"

Jim was acutely conscious of Kate, whose girlish innocence would sooner have connected the man she loved with a polar star than with a married woman. Elinor saw big, honest Gus with the dog's faith in his eyes changed to a question—to which he might not believe her answer.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she shuddered. "We can't!"

It roused Jim to a sense of the protection he owed the woman by his side.

"We can't take your friend with us." Jim wrenched out the words with difficulty. "But we'll run in on high speed and send out a car. It will be here in half an hour."

"You can't refuse to help an injured man—perhaps a dying man!" panted Baxter, utterly incredulous. "If the courtesy of the road is nothing to you, if decent humanity means nothing—why, you can't refuse to help a man like Jamieson! If you're afraid of the responsibility, I'll leave O'Hara and go with you." He grasped Mrs. Linnell's sleeve. "You are a woman. Make your husband take this man in, for the sake of his wife and boy." For the first time he noticed that Elinor kept her face hidden, and all at once he recognized the situation. "So that's it?" he demanded brutally. "You don't dare to be seen together? That's why you leave this man to die like a dog on the road! Afraid of your reputation? Take it unspotted to hell with you!"

The insult gave Jim the spur he needed to throw in his clutch and speed off in the darkness.

"Curse you!" cried Baxter after them. "If I knew your poisonous names, I'd publish them in every paper in the country! That's why the skunk pulled his cap over his eyes as soon as he stopped the car. If I had only thought to take his number! God in heaven, to leave a dying man like this!"

When an automobile and a hospital ambulance brought relief, a half-hour later,

they could only give the information that a telephone message had come in a voice they did not recognize, saying that Mr. Jamieson was injured at the fork of the Burns's Woods road.

### III

"I KNEW you would be here to-day," said Mrs. Linnell to Jim Blake, a week later.

At first he had a sense of revulsion at seeing her look so well and blooming, but at a second glance he noticed the dark circles under her eyes, and saw that her color had been well put on.

"I knew that once we must talk about"—her voice broke—"about it—together. Then never any more. Never any more! We must never see each other alone again."

"Never," he agreed monotonously.

Where was the breath of flame which had swept them together? Gone, as the winds of yesterday. Between them lay a red gash in the earth—the grave in which Jamieson was buried that day.

"Your husband?"

She understood the unfinished question.

"Gus knew Mr. Jamieson well." She put her hand to her throat, as if it were constricted. "He said he was the kindest man, generous and big-hearted to a fault—that he had helped more down-and-outs than any man in this State—and then to have help refused him! Gus read me the interview that Mr. Baxter gave the papers. It showed how excited he was when he said the car was black, when yours is blue, and that he couldn't distinguish the man's face, but he would know his hoarse, queer voice anywhere, and your natural voice is so laughing—so laughing!" She broke off with a sob. "It won't ever be quite like that again. When Gus read the interview he said that if the woman was married her husband could forgive her for being unfaith-

ful sooner than he could forgive her for the selfishness and cruelty of refusing to help—that she had put her reputation before her womanhood. He said that the woman was more to blame than the man. So I can never confess to him, and it will always lie between us, and I—I never knew before how much I cared for Gus!"

There was a silence. Then Blake spoke slowly.

"I have been with Kate most of this horrible week. She is so true that she steadies a man as his mother might. If my mother were alive, I might tell her, but I can't tell Kate. We've been talking about the Jamieson case, of course; nobody talked of anything else while he was lying there between life and death. Kate said that if the man had not wavered in his own mind he would have jumped out of his car at once and helped the wounded man in; that it was his place to settle the question, and the true chivalry would have been not to put the burden of such a terrible decision upon the woman. But he must have preferred a false chivalry to his human responsibility toward the life of an innocent person. Kate has an odd way of putting things.

"'Circumstances are only the tinder-box,' she said. 'It's character that strikes the spark.'"

"The terrible part, the thing I can't get away from, is that the doctors agreed that the hour's difference in getting him to the hospital meant the difference between life and death, because of the hemorrhage and the pneumonia which followed. But *we* didn't know that, we couldn't foresee that, so we are not guilty."

He tried to say it convincingly, to comfort her, even though he no longer loved her, but he could not look at her. He was looking out at the spring world from which Jamieson was shut away.